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ABSTRACT

In 1991, the National Center for Children in Poverty undertook a study of low-income parents as child care consumers. The study involved a review of current research findings, interviews with staff of child resource and referral agencies, and an examination of child care consumer education provided in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program. This report presents the results of these inquiries. Chapter I identifies sources of consumer information on child care. Three public subsidy programs discussed are the Family Support Act, Child Care and Development Block Grant, and the Title IV-A At-Risk Child Care Program. Chapter II considers parents as child care consumers, examining the ways parents search for child care, the kinds of child care families use and the kinds they really want, and the child care characteristics that satisfy parents. In chapter III, the same issues are examined with respect to low-income parents. In addition, constraints facing low-income child care users, including transportation problems, time constraints, lack of money and expertise, and problems related to cultural differences, are discussed. Finally, chapter IV focuses on the provision of child care consumer education, identifying essential program features, points in time when consumer education should be provided, delivery methods, and information provided to JOBS participants. The JOBS child care consumer education report is appended. (AC)

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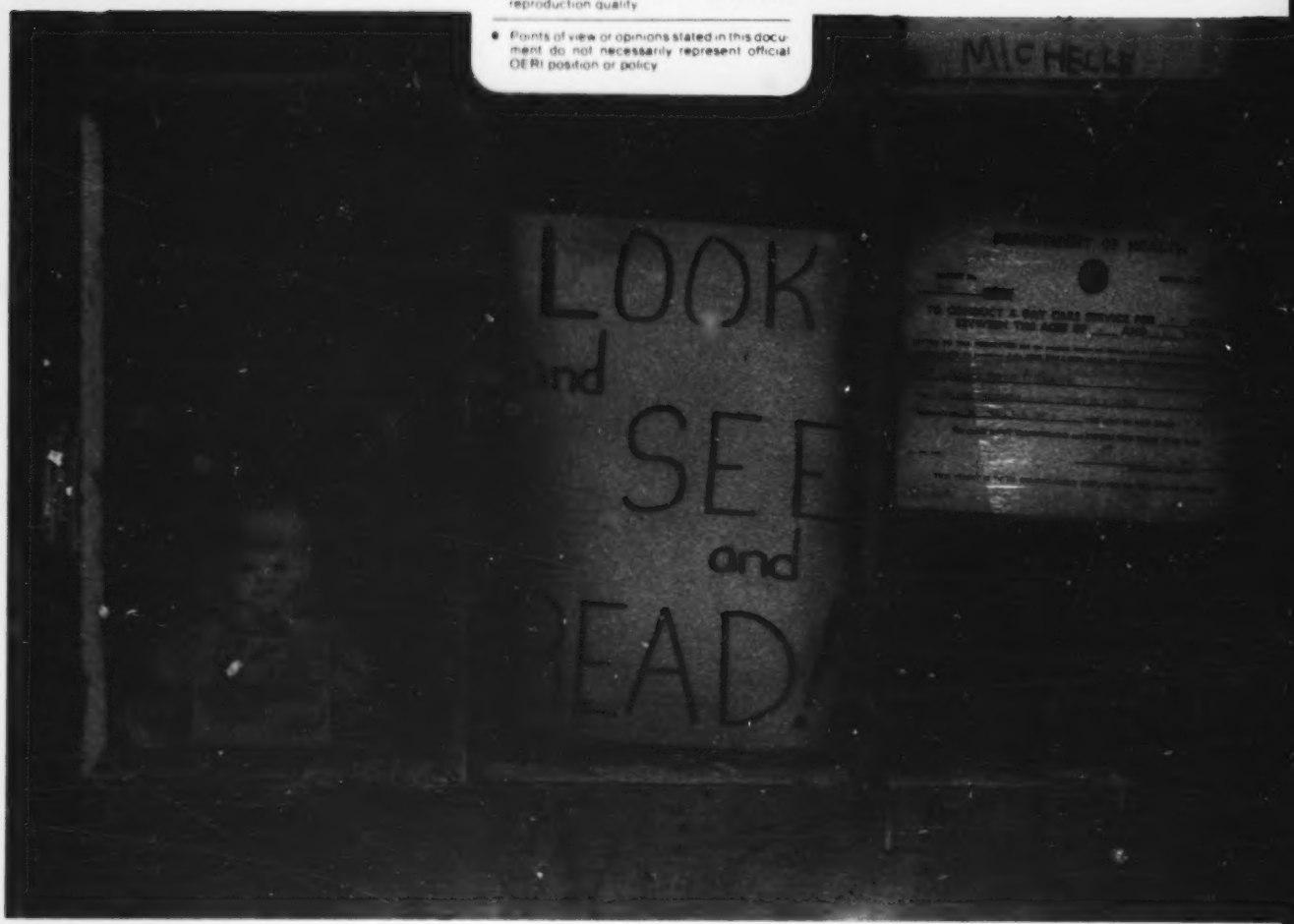

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CHILD CARE CHOICES, CONSUMER EDUCATION, AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

by Anne Mitchell, Emily Cooperstein, and Mary Larner

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN IN POVERTY

Child Care Choices, Consumer Education, and Low-income Families

by Anne Mitchell, Emily Cooperstein, and Mary Larner

National Center for Children in Poverty
School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York
1992

NATIONAL CENTER FOR CHILDREN IN POVERTY

The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) was established in 1989 at the School of Public Health, Columbia University. Its goal is to strengthen programs and policies for children and their families who live in poverty in the United States. The Center seeks to achieve this goal though interdisciplinary analysis and dissemination of information about public and private initiatives in the areas of early childhood care and education, maternal and child health, and the integration of services for young children and their families.

This monograph has been prepared through the Center's early childhood program and the Center's publications program, which is intended to disseminate knowledge and ideas that will contribute to improved services for poor young children and their families. The Center gratefully acknowledges the generosity of the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York for the core support that makes the publications program possible. The monograph does not necessarily reflect the foundations' views.

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Introduction

Two generations ago, many mothers joined the work force only after their children were grown. Today, many mothers join or rejoin the work force a few weeks or months after the baby's birth, arranging whatever child care makes work possible. Both high-income and low-income mothers need child care, and now that welfare reform measures are encouraging poor women with young children to enter the labor force, or to enroll in programs that will prepare them for work, the public's need for quality child care is increasing.

Satisfactory child care is an important influence on any parent's ability to do well at work or to succeed in school, and quality child care is known to have short- and long-term positive effects on children, particularly those from low-income families. But how do parents choose the child care that meets the demands of their own lives while meeting the developmental needs of their children? First, all parents need access to good, varied child care alternatives. Second, all parents benefit by becoming better-educated child care consumers.

In recent years, federal programs that provide child care subsidies for low-income families have emphasized giving low-income

parents the opportunity to choose their own child care arrangements by allowing them to use informal caregivers as well as licensed child care programs, and by offering voucher-type subsidies. These changes are meant to give those parents aided by public child care funds the same rights and responsibilities for choosing care that parents who pay privately have always had. However, learning about and finding good child care can be a particularly difficult process for parents when money is a problem.

Because informed consumers make better choices for themselves and their children, the issue of consumer education about child care relates closely to parental choice. Consumer education can facilitate parental choice, but it cannot make child care more affordable, and it does not enable parents to find child care that does not exist. Effective parental choice exists when parents are well-informed, have sufficient resources, and have access to real child care options.

In 1991, the National Center for Children in Poverty undertook a study of low-income parents as child care consumers. The study set out to find answers to three basic questions:

- What is known about how parents in general, and low-income parents in particular, search for, evaluate, and select child care?
- Do low-income parents differ from other parents as child care consumers? If so, how and why do they differ?
- How are the federal child care provisions for parent choice and consumer education being implemented in state and local welfare reform programs mandated by the 1988 Family Support Act?

To understand how low-income parents learn about child care and make their selections, the authors reviewed current research findings[1] and interviewed the staff of child care resource and referral agencies who work with low-income families every day. The authors also examined the types of child care consumer education provided to poor families enrolled in welfare reform programs; the findings of this survey, concerning the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) programs in particular, appear in the appendix of this report.

This report weaves together the results of these various inquiries to provide an assessment of the limited present understanding of the concerns, behavior, and needs of low-income child care consumers, and to highlight insights and principles that should guide consumer education efforts that will truly support the child care choices of those families.

I. Sources of Consumer Information on Child Care

Most people who are considering buying a car probably think of reading *Consumer Reports* before they buy. They also talk to other car owners about their experiences and their level of satisfaction with a particular manufacturer. Child care is a service that many families require just as surely as they do transportation—and child care expenses are as high as, and often higher than, monthly car payments.

Moreover, navigating the child care market is complex. The supply of child care varies enormously in both quantity and quality from one neighborhood to another. Child care comes in many forms, ranging from mothers-in-law to local child care centers.

Families who need child care hope to find the type of child care that will serve the needs of parents to work or go to school and will also offer a safe, enjoyable, and educational environment for the child or children. Choosing a child care arrangement is a personal decision involving family values about work, childrearing, and education, and it is an important decision that may have long-term consequences. Even so, little formal information is available to assist most consumers of child care as they make that decision.

Popular magazines such as *Working Mother, Parents,* and *Good Housekeeping* publish helpful articles on what to look for when choosing child care. In some communities, organizations called child care resource and referral (R&R) agencies provide information about how to seek out child care and what to look for when making a choice, and they can also give individualized assistance tailored to a family's needs and requirements. While R&R agencies are becoming more common in communities across the United States, they are still not widely available or known to parents. In addition, as referral agencies, they cannot offer evaluative judgments about specific child care programs (whether positive or negative), although many parents request such recommendations. When parents become child care consumers, they generally rely on their own family members and close friends for help.

Choosing a child care arrangement is a personal decision involving family values about work, childrearing, and education, and it is an important decision that may have long-term consequences.

Low-income parents, especially those who have been on welfare, may need additional assistance because they may be cut off from the sources of information that many parents use. Women on tight budgets are unlikely to buy the magazines that include articles on arranging child care. Low-income parents may not be served well by the community agencies that offer child care information and referral services. These agencies are not generally located in low-income neighborhoods, and they may not be known to these parents. Moreover, because welfare-dependent families tend to be concentrated in certain neighborhoods, their friends and neighbors may not have held stable jobs or have had to rely on a steady source of child care, so they lack useful information about child care options. Low-income neighborhoods tend to offer fewer child care options than more middle-class neighborhoods, which adds urgency and anxiety to the child care search that low-income parents face.

Parents of all income levels worry about the quality of the care their children receive, and research has established that while good child care is beneficial to low-income children, poor quality child care is harmful to them. As the National Research Council has put it: "Poor quality care . . . threatens children's development, especially children from poor and minority families."[2]

An effective response to the problem would offer parents more money to buy child care and would join together efforts to improve the quality of the available child care with well-designed consumer education programs and materials, all of which can help low-income parents make the best possible choices for their children. These are investments that will pay off in the long run.

Consumer choice and public subsidies for child care

In the past, a parent's eligibility for government-funded child care meant obtaining a space in a specific day care center or family day care home. But times have changed. Consumer education for parents is more important now because public child care funding emphasizes parents' rights to choose child care freely among several options and is moving toward more consumer-driven types of subsidies, such as vouchers and certificates with a monetary value that can be applied to various care situations. Even now, most public child care subsidy programs are this type. The dependent care tax credit, for example, which is the largest indirect federal child care subsidy, permits claims for child care expenses for any legal form of care the parent chooses for an age-eligible child.

Moreover, the trend in direct federal funding for child care allows much greater parent choice than was permitted before. Three new streams of federal funds for child care, the Family Support Act, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and the Title IV-A At-Risk Child Care Program, seek to promote parent choice. Each uses a different route to reach that goal, however. For instance, the Block Grant requires states to expand their payment mechanisms to include certificates that can be used to purchase any legal form of child care the parent chooses. The proposed regulations for the IV-A At-Risk program promote choice by limiting the power of states and localities to impose additional requirements on child care purchased with public funds.

Choice is a deeply held American value, as the surge of interest in choice in the public school system shows. In a 1989 national survey, 96 percent of the public (both parents and nonparents) agreed with the statement: "Parents should be able to choose among several options to decide which child care is best suited for their children."[3]

The Family Support Act

For low-income parents the emphasis has clearly shifted from prescription to choice. The Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 (welfare reform) established child care as a necessary support service for those parents

with young children receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) who participate in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program or in other approved education, job training, and employability programs. States must pay for child care for all JOBS participants, and must provide child care assistance to working families who need it for up to one year after they leave AFDC for employment—through the Transitional Child Care (TCC) program. The FSA permits states to alter both the methods of payment for child care and the forms of payment that can be subsidized for AFDC recipients. Its intent is to give AFDC families access to the same range of child care options that other parents have. (See the survey reported on in the appendix: "A Special Study on Child Care Consumer Education in the JOBS Program.")

The Child Care and Development Block Grant

The Child Care and Development Block Grant, which specifically cites consumer education, provides funds to states to improve the quality and availability of child care and to help low-income parents pay for it. The interim regulations state, "the Act clearly reflects Congress' belief that well-informed parents are in the best position to make decisions about their children's care,"[4] and Section 98.33 provides for consumer education. This provision requires that the state inform parents and the general public about applicable regulations, complaint procedures, and state policies and practices concerning child care services. It further encourages states to offer parents information about all child care options available in the state, and to provide advice to parents about identifying quality child care.

The Title IV-A At-Risk Child Care Program

The IV-A At-Risk program offers child care assistance to working parents who, without that assistance, might have to leave their jobs and become dependent on welfare. The proposed rules for this program do not specifically mention consumer education, but they firmly support parental choice: "The program provides significant support for parents' authority and right to nurture and supervise their children in affordable child care settings, which will enable parents to continue to work to achieve self-sufficiency. The choice of child care providers is with the parent."[5] The rules further stipulate that payment mechanisms and state or local regulatory requirements should not interfere with the parents' ability to choose the type of care they are comfortable with. Parent choice, among the widest possible range of child care options, is described as essential to supporting the family's independence and economic self-sufficiency.

The dramatic shift toward greater parent choice in public subsidy programs, and the growing demand for child care services on the part of parent-consumers at all income levels, together offer a strong argument for expanding the availability and quality of child care consumer education programs.

What is consumer education?

Consumer education is the process of communicating objective information about products or services to a prospective consumer. Consumers benefit from this information by making better choices of products or services; the marketplace benefits by producing more desirable (salable) products or services. Well-educated consumers are a force on the marketplace when they are able to actively choose well-made, useful items, and to reject poor or useless ones.

Consumer education takes a variety of forms. General public awareness efforts include nationwide campaigns that place messages on billboards attacking drunk driving, or schedule child abuse awareness commercials on television. Consumer education may also involve extensive information compiled for a specific target group of consumers, such as antismoking materials

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distributed to teenagers through the schools, or child care information pamphlets for new parents displayed in pediatricians' offices. This type of information also appears in videotape recordings that can be shown in waiting rooms, in meetings, or as part of individual interviews. The most specific forms of consumer education tailor the information to fit the requirements of a specific consumer; this occurs when, for instance, an R&R counselor gives the parent a personalized child care referral list including several child care providers that meet the parent's criteria regarding program features, location, and cost.

When consumer education helps families to find and recognize child care that meets their needs, it can lead to more stable child care arrangements. This stability in turn has positive effects on children and family members. In the long run, consumer education may also affect the quality and quantity of services offered in the child care market. As parents become better informed as consumers, their demands for better, more varied, or simply *more* child care services will come to be felt in the marketplace. While consumer pressure on the marketplace cannot and should not take the place of strong regulatory consumer protection systems, informed consumers can assist child care regulators do their jobs.

Although information affects the choices that consumers make, consumer education differs from promotion and advertising. Consumer education is not an attempt to change the consumer's values and preferences or to influence behavior in any particular direction. Instead, it might expand the range of options a consumer considers by providing information about child care both generally and in the local community—and it may help the consumer plan a strategy for exploring and choosing among available options.

An understanding of the behavior and attitudes of consumers can help inform the planners of consumer education programs. Effective consumer education uses language that is familiar to the consumer. It also offers information that consumers have indicated to be important, and it generally takes the consumer's perspective. The process of understanding the perspective of parents as child care consumers involves looking not just at what care arrangements they use but also at how they make those arrangements, how satisfied they are with them, and what their preferences are.

For this reason, the next section of this report presents the findings and conclusions from a wide range of studies concerning the child care preferences, choices, and concerns of families with young children. It provides a context for planning ways to assist low-income child care consumers.

II. Parents as Child Care Consumers

The process of choosing a child care arrangement can be described as a balancing act in which parents juggle a wide range of considerations. From an economist's point of view, the decision involves three competing factors: the quality of child care desired, the price of that care, and the family's resources. From that perspective, the choice of care requires that parents decide what kind of care they want, calculate the number of hours they need it (beyond what can be provided within the family), and then look for the best "deal" in the child care marketplace. Sociologists and psychologists, who have also examined how families negotiate this important decision, see the process as involving more subjective factors than just price and quality, such as values about childrearing, educational philosophy, and attitudes about work.

No family can maximize all of these factors at once, and trade-offs must be made among them in the light of the family's needs, resources, values, and knowledge base. All evidence indicates that low-income parents face the same complex decision-making process that other parents face, except that their balancing act usually includes more intransigent needs and more limited resources.

Since the focus of this report is low-income parents, the behaviors and patterns of low-income parents have been distinguished from those of all parents when possible. Although race and ethnicity are characteristics quite distinct from poverty, these differences are also noted wherever possible. These distinctions are important because it is practically impossible to compare the child care arrangements and satisfaction of a low-income Hispanic single mother who works part-time and has a toddler with those of a high-income white couple who both work and have a preschool child. Also, while children of all ages may need child care, most children over the age of five are in school much of the day, making their immediate needs for care somewhat less pressing than those of children age five and under. Therefore, data on school-age children are not included here.

All evidence indicates that low-income parents face the same complex decision-making process that other parents face, except that their balancing act usually includes more intransigent needs and more limited resources.

How do parents search for child care?

Parents generally use informal sources of information to find child care. The pattern many follow is to turn first to immediate family members and then to confidants (such as people they talk to every day about their children and other personal issues, or those they talk to when upset) and to close advisors (such as people from whom they seek advice about childrearing). Generally, these sources are moderately helpful. The next circle of sources includes other relatives, friends, co-workers, and finally neighbors.[6] The National Child Care Survey of 1990 found that two-thirds of parents learned about their current child care arrangement from friends, neighbors, or relatives.[7]

Only after all informal sources have been tried do parents typically turn to formal information sources. Many parents find child care services by reading the local neighborhood newspaper (where advertisements for family child care homes can be found) and by "driving around" (presumably to spot playgrounds or signs for day care centers). Later, parents consult other formal sources, such as bulletin boards and the telephone book, and they find these less effective. Finally, while many parents know that community agencies and community people might have child care information, they do not consult these sources often. A local public social service agency is the only agency likely to be consulted—probably to identify regulated child care providers.[8]

Nonetheless, some parents do use community agencies such as child care R&R agencies. In 1990, about 10 percent of parents found their child care arrangement through an R&R agency.[9] Once parents have contacted the R&R and received names and telephone numbers for several child care providers, they telephone and visit at least one, usually with their child.[10] Parents who use the assistance offered by R&Rs tend to also refer to formal sources of information—such as books, checklists, brochures, and lists of providers—more frequently than those parents who do not contact a R&R.[11] The strategies that most people use to find child care, relying on "word of mouth" from familiar sources before turning to formal ones, are typical of the steps people take when seeking other necessities, such as jobs or new places to live.

What kinds of child care do families use?

In the public's perception and often in practice, child care becomes necessary when mothers work outside the home. As a result, until recently, researchers collected data on child care use only for employed mothers (also including those in school or in job training or looking for work). In actuality, however, all types of families with young children use child care. In some, both parents work full-time or the single parent works; and in others, the parents work part-time or attend school or a training program. In still others, one parent is basically "at home" but uses child care for a break or to enable the child to have new social or educational experiences. Now, researchers have caught up with reality, and the 1990 National Child Care Survey[12] reports on the use of child care arrangements by both employed and non-employed mothers.

From the consumer's perspective, child care arrangements fall into two major categories: (1) care provided within the family, and (2) care arranged for outside the family—that is, in the child care market. Child care

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resources within the family include the care that parents provide themselves (while they work or by working alternating shifts) and care that other family members (often grandparents or aunts) can provide. Outside the family, choices include center-based programs (including preschools and nursery schools) and nonrelatives caring for the child in the child's home or in their home. The nonrelative care provider who comes to the child's home is often called a nanny or a sitter. Nonrelative care offered in the provider's home is called family day care.

Care within the family

In 1990, the majority of children age five and under had mothers who worked, and about half of these children were cared for within the family. The most common form of relative care for families with employed mothers is for the mother to look after the child while she works, or for the father to provide that care. "Shared care" occurs when the parents work different shifts. This form of child care has been increasing. By 1990, 30 percent of young children whose mothers worked that year were cared for primarily by their parents, up from 24 percent in 1985.[13] This is a much more common pattern for white families than for black or Hispanic families. Low-income families rely on

Table 1. Trends in primary child care arrangements used by working mothers with children under five (1984, 1987 and 1990)[13]

	1984 (%)	1987 (%)	1990 (%)
Care arrangements within the family			
Parents	24	24	30
Grandparents and other relatives	24	22	18
Total	48	46	48
Care arrangements in the child care market			
Nonrelatives (in the child's home)	6	6	4
Nonrelatives (outside of the home)	22	22	19
Centers (all types)	24	25	28
Total	52	53	51

Note: These totals do not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

shared care more than upper-income families do; however, families with moderate incomes are the most likely to use it. These moderate-income families are two-earner couples with shift work jobs—for example, a nurse and a police dispatcher. Not surprisingly, 65 percent of the children whose mothers were not employed in 1990 were cared for by their parents only.[15]

When parents cannot care for their children by themselves, they turn first to other family members, most commonly to grandparents. In 1990, relatives other than the child's parents cared for 18 percent of preschool children whose mothers were employed, down from 22 percent in 1987. Black families and Hispanic families are more likely than white families to rely on relatives for child care. In 1987, 18 percent of white children were cared for by relatives, compared with 38 percent of black children and 31 percent of Hispanic children.*[16] Relatives also play a role caring for children whose mothers do not work; in 1990, 11 percent of those children were cared for by kinfolk.[19]

Care outside the family

Three basic forms of child care take place outside the family network—nannies or sitters (nonrelatives in the child's home); family day care (nonrelatives in the provider's home); and centers, which operate both full-day and part-day. Over the past two decades, the use of center-based child care has increased faster than any other form. In 1990, 28 percent of all preschool children with employed mothers attended centers, compared with only 6 percent in 1965. By 1990, more than half of the young children who received care from outside the family were in centers. That year, only 4 percent of children under five whose mothers worked were in their own homes with sitters or nannies. The remaining children whose mothers worked (19 percent) received care in family day care homes. Nearly all the children placed in family day care homes have employed mothers; fewer than 3 percent of the children whose mothers were not employed in 1990 were cared for in family day care homes.[20]

As children reach age three, they are much more likely to receive care outside their family. In 1990, employed mothers used nonrelative care for about 45 percent of children under three, but they looked

When parents cannot care for their children by themselves, they turn first to other family members, most commonly to grandparents.

** Among low-income children of all races, 35 percent were cared for by relatives. Low-income teenage mothers are more likely than other mothers to use relative care; in one study of three communities, 69 percent of teenage mothers used relatives.[17] Relatives are used most often by low-income families in which the mother works part-time; 75 percent of children in these families are cared for by their own parents or other relatives.[18]*

outside the family for care for 62 percent of three- and four-year-olds. As children reach preschool age, they are enrolled more often in centers. In 1990, just 20 percent of children under age three were in center-based care, compared with 43 percent of three- and four-year-olds. The shift toward centers is even more pronounced for children whose mothers do not work: in 1990, just 5 percent of these infants and toddlers were in centers, while 30 percent of the three- and four-year-olds whose mothers were home attended center-based programs.[21]

These findings from national surveys show that, while more children are in child care now than in the past and the use of particular arrangements has changed over time, the roughly even split between child care provided within the family and child care sought outside has remained fairly steady.

Table 2. Primary care arrangements for children with employed and nonemployed mothers, by child's age (1990)[22]

	Mother employed (%)	Mother not employed (%)
Children under three (0–2 years)		
Grandparents and other relatives	21	13
Nonrelative in the child's home	3	4
Family day care	22	3
Centers	20	5
Parents only	32	73
Three- and four-year-olds		
Grandparents and other relatives	16	8
Nonrelative in the child's home	2	1
Family day care	17	1
Centers	43	30
Parents only	21	58

Note: Totals do not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

What kinds of child care do families really want?

These survey findings on child care usage patterns reveal information about how parents act as consumers of child care, but they are only rough indicators of parental *preferences* for child care. Usage equals preference only in well-functioning economic markets where consumers purchase services that maximize their preferences at prices that fit their fiscal resources, and where a sufficient supply balances the demand. Child care, in fact, is not a perfect economic market; it is a mixture of family and marketplace services, paid and unpaid, about which consumers know relatively little because the children experience the child care—while their parents make the decisions.

As stated earlier, the process of making child care arrangements involves complex decision-making that balances many competing criteria—such as financial cost; family resources, both human and financial; child-rearing values such as love, education, security, discipline, and safety; logistical considerations such as convenient hours and location; and attitudes toward maternal employment.[23]

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In one small study of child care users, mothers were asked what they liked least about their child care arrangement. Family day care users were likely to say "having to work at all," or to express feelings of guilt about working, while center users did not express those feelings. It appears that mothers who were unhappy that they could not be home with their children were especially likely to turn to home-like child care settings.[24] Given that child care decision-making is so complex, finding out what consumers really want is not easy.

Levels of satisfaction

Researchers try to gauge the preferences of consumers by asking parents how satisfied they are with the child care they have selected. Answers to these questions indicate that expressed satisfaction among child care users is quite high—85–90 percent of almost any sample of parents report that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their child care. This level of satisfaction holds across different types of care, different qualities of care, and different regions of the country. The 1990 National Child Care Survey found that 90 percent of parents said they were satisfied with their current child care arrangements. However, in a finding that reflects the complexity of the issue, 25 percent of those parents said they wanted to change their arrangement. Half of those desiring a change wanted to switch to child care centers, the form of care many prefer as their children grow older.[25]

Ideal or preferred forms of care

Another way to look at satisfaction with child care is to ask parents about ideal situations. When researchers ask parents whether they would stay at home to care for their children if the family did not have to worry about money, the vast majority of parents say yes. When asked what the ideal form of care for children of different ages would be, nearly all parents say that infants should be cared for only by their parents. In one recent regional survey, 97 percent of nonemployed mothers and 64 percent of employed mothers who were asked this question gave that answer.[26] To restate this ideal: most parents would prefer not to have to work while their children are very young.

A third approach researchers use to learn parents' views is to ask what form of child care they would prefer to use—if all options were equally available and affordable. In a national sample of parents in 1989, 75 percent said they preferred having relatives care for their young children, while 13 percent preferred centers and 12 percent preferred other forms of care.[27] Since usage patterns show that relatives provide only about half of all child care,

some of the parents who prefer relative care must be dissatisfied users of other types of care. To date, no studies have queried those parents who lack child care about *their* preferences, asking them what they wished for but failed to find.

A number of smaller studies have looked more closely at preferences and satisfaction among parents already using centers or family day care—asking parents what their first choice of care would be or whether they would want to change from their current child care arrangement. Among well-educated, middle-class parents who used an R&R to find child care, about 70 percent reported using their first choice of care.[28] In a Canadian study, 60–80 percent of parents said they preferred the form of care they were using.[29] Taken together, all these studies suggest that about two-thirds of parents are content with their child care arrangements, while one-third may not be using the type of care they prefer.

The apparent contradiction between high levels of reported satisfaction and the fact that many parents are not using the kind of child care they prefer, and wish to change, can be explained in several ways. Perhaps parents, especially first-time child care users, are expressing their relief that the stressful search for child care is over—as much as expressing their satisfaction with the care itself. Another explanation is that parents need to believe that the choice they have made for their child is a good one, in order for them to succeed in their adult roles of workers or students. Even if they are disappointed in the care, they might not acknowledge dissatisfaction because to do so would threaten their sense of security. It is also possible to both be satisfied with a choice and at the same time prefer another option—one that might be not just good but optimal.

What child care characteristics satisfy parents?

A great deal of discussion surrounds the question of what parents look for and value when they choose child care. Contrary to popular belief, cost and convenience are not the only, or even the most important, factors that parents mention when it comes to child care. When parents rate the emphasis they give to different features of child care in their search for care, *quality* is *key*.

Taken together, all these studies suggest that about two-thirds of parents are content with their child care arrangements, while one-third may not be using the type of care they prefer.

"Health and safety" is the highest-rated feature of quality, after which most parents rate "the personality of the provider," "how children get along with each other and the adults," "the provider's childrearing philosophy," and "coordination between home and the provider." Cost and convenience to home or work are important, but to a lesser degree.[30]

In the 1990 National Child Care Survey, 60 percent of parents said some child-oriented aspect of quality was the most important factor in their choice of child care. About one-quarter cited logistics, and fewer than 10 percent said cost was most important.[31]

When assessing child care arrangements, parents appear to rely on a global understanding of quality, not a set of distinct characteristics. They respond to the interactions they see between adults and children, and to the overall environment, rather than checking the particular parameters that professionals use in judging quality, such as group size or teacher training. Parental satisfaction rests primarily on their child's experience (concerning the

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teacher's warmth, the opportunities for learning, and the day-to-day activities), although parents do react negatively to teacher turnover.[32]

In contrast, adult-oriented aspects of child care—such as cost, location, hours, flexibility of center policies, and the opportunities to participate in decision-making—have relatively little influence on parents' expressed satisfaction with child care. Those features do contribute to the mother's sense of well-being and her satisfaction with work, however. When adult aspects of child care are satisfactory, mothers report less stress, fewer job-related health problems, and less spillover of work problems into family life.[33]

Child care thus plays two distinct roles for parents: it provides a good experience for their children, and it supports their well-being as workers. Finding a child care arrangement means searching for a good fit for the whole family, taking into account both the child's and the adults' perspectives.

Parents derive satisfaction from different aspects of child care, depending on what kind of care they use. Center users typically mention their desire that their children have a good learning experience and interaction with same-age peers; in choosing care for their children, they are seeking a learning environment. Family day care users more often speak of valuing the qualities of the caregiver, the convenience, and the home-like setting; they are choosing a substitute for home or for mother.[34]

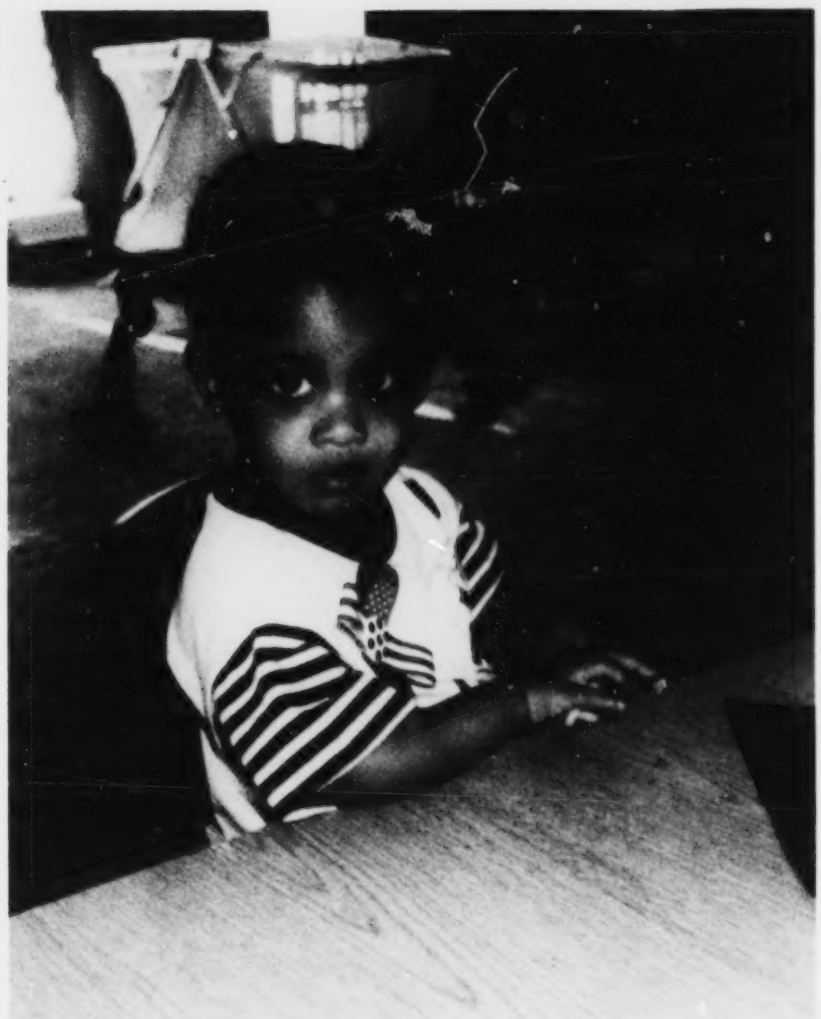
Satisfaction with child care is a complex concept. Aspects of care that influence satisfaction vary and depend on, among other things, the age of the child, the values of the parents, the mother's attitude toward work, and the availability of preferred child care options.

The choice process

No one knows for certain how parents consider the different types of care as they make a choice, or how they evaluate aspects of each child care arrangement they examine. One theory is that parents first seek to satisfy child care needs within the family. Failing that, they move to market care. There they seriously consider only those options that fit the family's logistical needs, especially cost and convenience. That smaller set of potential child care arrangements is then evaluated in terms of quality.[35]

Finding a child care arrangement means searching for a good fit for the whole family, taking into account both the child's and the adults' perspectives.

Another explanation is that the parents' childrearing values or desires for education determine the options to be considered; at that point, the choice among options leans toward satisfying adult needs.[36] The effect of values on parental choices is evident whenever parents use relatively inconvenient or costly child care alternatives in order to maximize other criteria.[37] Another possibility is that choice factors may not be considered sequentially. In a complex and uniquely human fashion, small trade-offs take place between child and adult needs, and between values and logistics, until the best available choice is made.



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III. Low-income Parents as Child Care Consumers

Low-income families are in many ways just like other families when it comes to child care. They face the same complex decision-making process, and their sources of satisfaction with child care are nearly identical. They use the same range of child care options that other families use. However, low-income families turn to available types of child care in different proportions than other parents, and they are much less satisfied with their choices than other parents are.

These differences can be explained by the severe constraints that low-income families face in making most major decisions. Income, or lack of it, inevitably influences the child care behavior of consumers. Some of the effects of poverty are obvious; having no automobile and little money limits the child care choices that families can consider "available." Even with little money to spend, low-income families who pay for child care devote nearly one-quarter of their incomes to child care (23 percent), while families with incomes over $50,000 spend only 6 percent of their incomes on child care.[38]

Other influences of poverty are less obvious. The kinds of jobs that many low-income workers hold are unstable, pay low wages, and often require nontraditional working hours. Formal child care settings are rarely suited to this kind of situation, forcing low-income families to use multiple child care providers and to rely heavily on the flexibility of relatives.

The supply of child care does not offer the same range of options, nor is the supply as plentiful, in low-income neighborhoods as in other neighborhoods[39]—except perhaps for informal child care arrangements with neighbors and friends, and these types of care are often not dependable. Given transportation limitations, low-income families generally have to use what they can find close to home. Logistical constraints like these are the most powerful influences on the child care choices of low-income families.

What kinds of child care do low-income families use?

Largely for the reasons suggested above, low-income families use types of child care in differing proportions than families with more economic resources.

Care within the family

About 60–70 percent of poor children are cared for within their extended families, as compared with about 50 percent in the general

population. Teenage mothers and mothers who work part-time are those most likely to rely on relatives.[40] A child's grandparents, sisters, and aunts, rather than fathers, are the most common source of within-family child care for low-income mothers; this may be because in many low-income families, there is no father present.

Many people assume that parents rely on relatives for child care in order to save money. In reality, parents usually pay the caregivers who are related. National surveys show that up to half of relative care is paid for as a cash transaction, and about 10 percent is compensated through noncash barter arrangements such as exchanging child care or other services.[41]

The primary reason for choosing relatives is trust. Families do not typically categorize child care in the ways statisticians do—by the setting and the degree of formality—but rather as "familiar" vs. "stranger." Relatives and trusted friends fall in the preferred "familiar" category, and most other forms of child care, provided by strangers, fall into the less-desirable "stranger" category.[42] For some working-class and lower-income families, formal institutions such as nursery schools and child care centers embody a set of distinct cultural values from which parents want to protect their children.[43] In one study, those teenage mothers with children under three who relied on relatives said that they "did not believe that a stranger could be trusted to care for their children because their children were young and would be unable to report abusive behavior by the caregiver."[44]

Other researchers, using data from the large-scale National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to analyze the relationships among child care, maternal employment, family income, and child development status, report that infants cared for by their grandmothers are better off developmentally than those in other forms of child care. Those findings were strongest for infants in low-income families.[45]

Families do not typically categorize child care in the ways statisticians do—by the setting and the degree of formality—but rather as "familiar" vs. "stranger."

Care outside the family

The most striking patterns in the relationship between family income and child care use relate to reliance on the child care marketplace for care. First, as family income rises, the use of extrafamilial child care rises also. Fewer than half of low-income children are cared for outside the family, compared with two-thirds of upper-income children. Second, the proportion of children enrolled in centers rises directly with income as well; only 16 percent of children whose families earn under $15,000 are in centers, while 35 percent of those whose families earn $45,000 or more attend centers.[46]

Table 3. Child care arrangements used by working mothers with children under five, by race, ethnicity, and family income, 1987[a]

	Father or mother (%)	Grandparent or other relative (%)	Nonrelative (in the child's home) (%)	Nonrelative (outside the child's home) (%)	Center (%)
Race					
White	27	18	6	23	25
Black	9	38	7	19	28
Ethnicity					
Hispanic	18	31	12	19	21
Non-Hispanic	25	21	6	23	26
Family income					
$0–$15,000	22	32	7	23	16
$15,000–$30,000	32	24	5	19	20
$30,000–$45,000	24	17	6	25	29
$45,000 +	15	18	9	24	35
Overall (all incomes, races, and ethnicities)	24	22	6	22	25

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

What kinds of child care do low-income families really want?

Research shows that low-income parents are much less satisfied with their child care and less likely to be using their preferred form of care than other parents. In a study involving AFDC mothers with children under six in Boston, Denver, and Charlotte, only half of the mothers reported complete satisfaction with their child care arrangement. One-quarter of the mothers were using their preferred form of care, with three-quarters using a type of child care that was not their first choice. More than half of all mothers in the study said that centers were their first choice for care. The most satisfied mothers were those whose children were in centers, and the least satisfied were those who used nonrelatives (either in-home sitters or family day care providers); only 2 percent of the mothers using one of the latter types of care said they preferred these situations.[48]

About one-third of low-income mothers studied in Chicago, Camden, and Newark said that they preferred a different child care arrangement than the one they were using. For half of these mothers, the reason for wanting to change was "so my child will learn more." Many wanted to switch to center-based child care. All the logistical reasons for wanting a change—such as hours, location, cost, and reliability—were minor by comparison to the desire that the child have more learning opportunities.[49] The low-income substudy of the 1990 National Child Care Survey confirmed these findings: 90 percent of low-income parents expressed satisfaction with their current child care arrangements, but 27 percent wanted to change them. The overwhelming majority cited quality as their reason.[50]

What child care characteristics satisfy low-income parents?

Factors that satisfy parents about child care appear to be unrelated to family income. One study of urban mothers receiving AFDC who used child care found satisfaction to rely on a combination of several features: convenience (in both hours and location); good adult supervision; the child's happiness with the care arrangement and the caregiver; the child's opportunity to learn new things; and favorable child/adult ratios. No one form of child care can meet all these dimensions of satisfaction, because each one has strengths and weaknesses. For instance, relatives are likely to make the child happy, to care for very few children, and to be flexible in terms of schedule and cost. On the other hand, centers are superior in the learning opportunities they can offer, and they can be conveniently located.[51]

This same study showed that the age of the child influenced the features that low-income mothers valued in their child care arrangements. When mothers of preschoolers believed that the child was happy about the care experience and was learning new things, the mothers were more satisfied. For parents of infants and toddlers, a convenient location and a low ratio of children to adults were the most important factors. It was reasonable for these mothers to emphasize location, "given their need to carry very young children and their paraphernalia—bottles, diapers, and changes of clothes" without the convenience of a car.[52] Parental concern about low child/adult ratios is also understandable because very young children are so dependent on the adults who care for them.

For low-income parents, satisfaction with child care also depends on adult-related aspects of child care. Among the urban AFDC mothers studied, satisfaction was highest for mothers who missed the fewest days of work (those with reliable child care providers); for mothers whose child care was most convenient in hours and location; and for mothers whose child care arrangement was stable over time.[53] Satisfaction decreased when parents had to use an increased number of arrangements for the care of one child.[54] These concerns are understandable, given the tenuous hold many low-income workers have on their jobs and their inflexible work schedules.

The opinions of "potential" low-income child care consumers reveal some of the same attitudes about work found among other parents. A study in three cities—Denver, Boston, and Charlotte—found that AFDC mothers who believed that the child care they preferred would be hard to get, and those who preferred center care, were most likely to begin working and using child care—perhaps because they were realistic and knowledgeable about the child care market and had positive attitudes toward work. AFDC parents who were better informed about AFDC provisions with regard to paying for child care were also more likely to begin using child care.[55] Consumer education that provides information about the child care marketplace and about AFDC policies on paying for child care may encourage women to enter the labor force. It can be a useful tool in welfare-to-work programs.

Constraints facing low-income child care users

To gain more insight into the way low-income parents approach and resolve the dilemma of arranging child care, the authors of this report interviewed parent counselors in R&R agencies that have had substantial experience working with low-income families. Those interviews corroborated and elaborated the research-based information already presented in this discussion, and they underscored the fact that low-income consumers have preferences and make choices that are similar to those of other families. What is different is the context in which these families make child care decisions—a context that sharply constrains the options parents can consider and the choices they can make.

Transportation problems

R&R counselors report that transportation is often a problem for low-income families. Having no car or an unreliable car is a severe restriction on child care choice; this situation leads parents to select care that is close to home, even if that care is less desirable in other respects than arrangements located farther away. Public transportation helps families get around in some large urban communities, but it is seldom feasible to ride a bus in one direction for child care and then in another direction for work. As one urban R&R staffer said, "In Texas, if you don't have a car, you're out of luck."

Time constraints

The interviews with R&R staff revealed another constraint that limits the low-income parents' child care search—time. Most of these parents "don't have the luxury of time to look." This is not because they do not

plan ahead. Rather, the job market is such that their prospective employer is likely to say, "You've got the job if you can start tomorrow; otherwise, I'll take someone else." Likewise, an AFDC mother participating in a welfare-to-work program may learn on a Friday that she can have a training program spot only if she can arrange child care by Monday. Some states, in an effort to promote efficiency in their JOBS program, require the participant to make a child care selection in four days or less. These regulations make it very difficult for parents to make satisfying and stable child care arrangements. (See the appendix for details of a special study on the way JOBS participants learn about and are helped to arrange child care.)

Not enough money

For those low-income parents not poor enough to qualify for public subsidies, the cost of care is an obvious constraint on choice. Many times parents have to settle for what they feel is a poorer child care option because it is all they can afford. In these circumstances, R&R counselors report that they focus on helping the parents find the best settings within the family's financial range, and on helping them make an arrangement that will be stable. Even when the outside-of-family child care supply is ample and varied, low-income parents have to settle for "next best" much more often than other parents.

Lack of expertise

Some R&R counselors note that low-income parents seem to be less familiar with child care options than other parents, presumably because they have had less personal experience with school or work situations that necessitate child care, and because they have fewer experienced friends to advise them. These parents may not know what to expect of child care, nor what a typical child care center or a family day care home looks like. Low-income parents, especially those on welfare, are not accustomed to having any choice in most aspects of their daily lives, and they may be unprepared to deal with the complexities that the child care decision presents. In addition, many of these parents have a profound sense of distrust of the "system" (welfare departments, schools, or city agencies), which stems from their previous experiences of mistreatment and failure. They may perceive child care as yet another part of that system, particularly when they are obliged to use it to participate in mandatory welfare-to-work programs.

Even when the outside-of-family child care supply is ample and varied, low-income parents have to settle for "next best" much more often than other parents.

Culture

Another dimension of child care that R&R counselors indicate has special importance to low-income parents is the need for cultural continuity between the child care setting and the home. For example, black parents appear to prefer black providers and center-based programs. Low-income parents both prefer and use relatives more than higher-income parents do. Parents who speak little or no English understandably want a child care provider who can speak their own language; family members and neighborhood-based providers often fit that requirement.

Cultural traditions about food can also be very important to children and parents. Hispanic mothers interviewed in one low-income neighborhood were concerned when their children began to lose weight after they started to attend day care centers. In one case, the child liked the "new" food at day care and refused to eat at home; in another case, the child refused to eat the unfamiliar food served at the center.[56] The desire for cultural familiarity is a concern for many parents, but it becomes an important factor for low-income parents because economically disadvantaged families, as a group, are more racially and ethnically diverse than the rest of the population.

Conclusion

All parents want their children *to be happy and safe and to learn* while they are away at work or at school. Families who are struggling to become economically self-sufficient (or trying to maintain their independence) are no different. They want good child care just as much as other families do. What is different is the context of their lives, the neighborhoods where they live, the supply of child care available to them, and the realities and insecurities they face in the workplace. These factors become a powerful force that affects their child care choices.

As more and more low-income families become child care consumers, policymakers and agencies must recognize and take account of the context of poor families' lives, must understand how that context affects parental consumer behavior, and must design appropriate policies and practices that will support and protect both children and their families.

IV. Child Care Consumer Education

Consumer education programs attempt to support parents who are making child care choices. They offer information and guidelines for parents to interpret in light of their own values and concerns. Like any other form of education, consumer education about child care involves content, timing, and process. Three questions are key: "What?" "When?" and "How?"

To be effective, the consumer education program has to deliver what the consumer wants and needs to know at the time when he or she most needs to know it, and in a manner that is most conducive to his or her noticing, understanding, and acting on the information. The information is most powerful when presented from the *consumer's* point of view. For this reason, the language and thought process of the parent seeking child care (i.e., the consumer) should inform the design and delivery of consumer education.

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What?

The specific goal of a consumer education program determines the level of information that should be conveyed. General child care awareness campaigns, presenting information in posters or in short spots on television or radio, typically have a simple, straightforward message—one idea. A general campaign can make the public aware that a statewide system of child care R&R agencies exists to provide help for parents, or it can promote the idea that quality child care is good for families.

However, much of what parents want and need to know about child care is complicated, and it cannot be summarized in a 30-second public service announcement. Videotapes, for example, are powerful tools of communication that can help to present a more detailed or complex message. It is also helpful to present the videotape's key points in a simple brochure—so that the viewer has something to take home for later reference.

The content of a detailed consumer education program will vary according to the local context of child care supply and the circumstances of the families the program works with, but the content should always include six major features:

1. Describing factors to be considered in deciding what form of care will be best for the family:

Quality matters for both children and parents. Attention to what both the child and the parents need is important. The underlying message should be, "There is no single kind of child care that is right for every family. Each family creates arrangements that fit its unique combination of interests and needs."

2. Describing the options for child care:

Every consumer education program should outline the entire range of alternatives: relying on relatives; hiring an in-home sitter or a nanny; sharing a sitter with another family; using a family day care provider; or enrolling in a center-based child care program—whether it is called a preschool, a child development center, or Head Start.

3. Counseling the parent about what he or she can expect from government agencies in terms of child care consumer protection:

Parents need to know which forms of child care are and are not covered by the state's regulatory system, and they should learn how effectively that system monitors compliance with its published standards.

4. Informing the parents about how to search for and judge child care:

Checklists can give parents an idea of what to look for when they talk with providers and visit programs. Selection criteria to be suggested to parents should blend those aspects of child care known to satisfy parents and those aspects proven to promote better outcomes for children. Detailed information can also list the types of arrangements parents can expect to find in their own communities.

5. Providing information on what the various types of child care are likely to cost, and what financial help may be available:

Information about the average costs of different forms of care in the local market helps parents plan and choose wisely. It is also important to give parents information on tax code provisions that allow credits for child care expenses, and to explain the public or private subsidies that a family may be entitled to receive.

6. Helping parents create and maintain an open, communicative, and stable relationship with a child care provider:

Child care is not a product to be purchased only once. Rather, it is an ongoing relationship that must be managed. Maintaining a good relationship helps ensure that the family's and provider's needs are met. Consumers can profit from counseling guidance on how to change an arrangement that is unsatisfactory.

When?

Consumer education is most effective when it takes place at certain points in a family's life cycle—particularly when changing circumstances make new child care choices necessary. Prime points in time for child care consumer education include the following situations:

- When a child has been born
- When a parent with young children of any age is about to enter the work force for the first time
- When a child reaches about the age of three—when many parents change arrangements to maximize educational opportunities
- When situational changes force a change in a family's child care arrangements, such as the shifting of work schedules or a new job, a move to a new community, or dissatisfaction with existing child care

How?

The methods for delivering child care consumer education can vary widely. The most common information medium is printed materials, such as brochures, pamphlets, brief articles, and checklists. Sources of these materials include agencies such as licensing offices, social services departments, R&R agencies, and articles in popular magazines.

Consumer education programs increasingly use videotape presentations. The tapes are produced for a variety of settings, including group meetings, waiting rooms, and private homes. They are often produced by public agencies, and they tend to cover the same information conveyed in printed materials. The added dimension is that they visually portray familiar situations and describe varied forms of care and examples of how different parents search for care. Videotape is an attractive medium for many reasons. It engages attention more effectively than a brochure, and viewers may identify with the parents who are depicted. Some adult learning styles are visual, and videotape can be a good way to reach parents with low literacy skills.

Individualized methods of delivering consumer education, especially by telephone, have long been the hallmark of R&R agencies. Telephone counseling gives the parent personalized attention, and it allows the consumer educator to tailor the information to the client's needs. The successful telephone counselor is sensitive and responsive to the parent. She or he hears how much the client already knows, and senses how much more the parent wants to know.

In some situations, face-to-face counseling is possible—when the parent can conveniently get to an R&R office or when a counselor comes to a work place to meet with a group or with individual parents. Although providing individualized consumer education is significantly more costly than distributing brochures or showing videotapes, such education is often far more helpful to parents than any other method. It can address directly both their preferences and the constraints they face as they choose a child care arrangement.

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For JOBS program participants

In the special study reported on in the appendix, the authors examined the types of consumer education provided to welfare-dependent mothers who participate in welfare-to-work programs funded under the Family Support Act's JOBS program. Interviews with public agency staff members at the state and local levels in nine states revealed wide variations in the way JOBS participants learn about child care and are helped to make good choices.

It was learned that caseworkers and R&R counselors use brochures, videotapes, group orientation sessions, and conversations in differing degrees and at various points in time. In many cases, however, they offer detailed child care information and assistance only after problems with child care have already interfered with the parent's participation in employment or training programs. Had the same help been provided when the mother first entered the program, she might have made a more suitable and reliable child care choice in the beginning. Process, timing, content, and strategies all work together to make consumer education either powerful or irrelevant.

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The appendix includes descriptions of how JOBS consumer education programs work, and it includes hypothetical scenarios (based on real situations) that can guide JOBS program administrators in other states.

Conclusion

Effective consumer education encompasses varied forms of communication that are suited to simple messages, detailed information, and personal counseling about the choice process. The parent's perspective provides the foundation for a good consumer education program. The content of the program rests on a thorough understanding of parental behavior in searching for, evaluating, and choosing child care, and it shows respect for the context of the parent's decision-making.

High quality consumer education gives parents the confidence and the information they need to make good child care choices for their children. The effects of consumer education are limited for low-income parents, however, because these parents have little purchasing power and few options. There may be no real choices for these parents to make. For professionals and workers in the child care field to truly support parents and children, our families need good information, adequate resources, and ample child care alternatives to choose among.

To be effective, the consumer education program has to deliver what the consumer wants and needs to know at the time when he or she most needs to know it, and in a manner that is most conducive to his or her noticing, understanding, and acting on the information.

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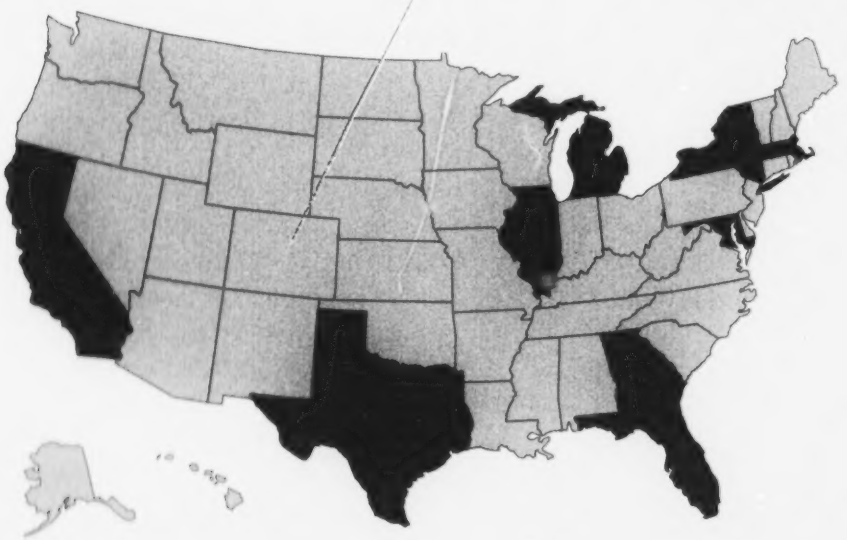
APPENDIX: A SPECIAL STUDY ON CHILD CARE CONSUMER EDUCATION IN THE JOBS PROGRAM

Welfare recipients who participate in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program mandated in the 1988 Family Support Act (FSA), as well as welfare recipients in other approved education and training programs, are entitled to receive subsidized child care, both while they attend job training or education classes and for one year after they leave welfare for work. As a two-generational intervention strategy, the JOBS program has the potential to interrupt the cycle of intergenerational poverty by combining services to help parents moving from welfare to work with efforts to promote the healthy development of children.[1]

The child care support built into the JOBS program often enables welfare-dependent families to make use of child care for the first time. The FSA emphasizes parental choice among a wide range of child care options, and the legislation offers an opportunity for state and local agencies to deliver child care consumer education to recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) who participate in the program.

By documenting the process by which JOBS participants learn about child care, this special study sought to find out if and how the FSA opportunity is being used in nine states—California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, and Texas. These nine states either had experience with welfare-to-work efforts prior to passage of the FSA or began to implement the legislation rapidly after its passage. They also had an established network of child care resource and referral (R&R) agencies, or had involved R&Rs in their welfare reform efforts.



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Goal/Method

The goal of this study was to find out as much as possible about the ways in which JOBS participants in the sampled states were learning about child care and making child care choices. To assess the consumer education that these parents were receiving, both state and local staff from appropriate public agencies and from the child care R&R community were interviewed by telephone. All of the individuals interviewed also provided copies of relevant materials they had developed or had used for consumer education, such as brochures or videotapes.

At the state level, the authors interviewed one or more persons from the agency responsible for implementing the JOBS program, such as the department of social services, department of public aid, department of public welfare, department of human resources, or JOBS or employment services office. These employees held a variety of titles, including program specialist, program coordinator, child care specialist, and JOBS child care program manager. On the local level, interviews were conducted with at least two people who worked directly with clients in a JOBS office. An effort was made to reach workers from different JOBS program service delivery areas within each state in order to get a sense of the diversity in that state's consumer education process. The titles held by these interviewees included: JOBS caseworker, unit supervisor, and child care management services worker (in Texas).

Additional interviews were held with staff members of local R&R agencies who had direct contact with parents, such as telephone counselors, with directors of local R&R agencies, and with persons from the statewide R&R network. (All of these states, except Georgia, had such a network.) The interviews were guided by protocols developed for each category of respondent.*

Caveat: Practices May Vary

Consumer education in the JOBS program is conducted differently in all nine states, and in some cases, it differs from area to area within a given state. This can be explained partially by the fact that states exert differing degrees of control over local policy and practices. Some states have a centralized structure for delivering social welfare services, whereas others are decentralized or have a system of local control. In a centralized system, the state agency designs the JOBS program and sets the policies that local offices carry out; each area within the state then follows a similar JOBS program model and has a similar consumer education process. Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Georgia are highly centralized models. Other states, such as Texas and Illinois, have centralized systems but allow "locals" more variation. Finally, in California and New York, the state agency broadly

** Copies of the telephone interview protocols and of all materials collected are available in the library of the National Center for Children in Poverty.*

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determines policy, but each county office has a great deal of flexibility to determine how it implements the JOBS program.

The consumer education process, therefore, is often quite different from county to county in these states. Moreover, since the JOBS programs are still fairly new and practices are evolving, the reader should not assume that the information obtained in 1991 remains an exact portrayal of any specific state's practices.

Organization of the Study's Findings

This report organizes the information gathered from the interviews with state and local personnel working in JOBS program child care. It first summarizes what the study revealed about how consumer education took place in the study states: How was it done, when was it offered, and who was responsible for it? Second, the report discusses the types of information that JOBS program parents received about child care, and reviews some of the consumer education materials (brochures, videotapes, checklists) the states were using. Two fictitious scenarios describe typical JOBS clients and their experiences with child care consumer education. The report concludes by outlining proposed improvements that could be made in the consumer education provided for JOBS participants. These suggestions are made in the context of what is known about both consumer behavior and the JOBS program.

The Process and Timing of JOBS Consumer Education

Child care is a support service in the JOBS program. It is provided to facilitate a client's participation in the education and job training that are at the heart of the program. As a result, the delivery of child care information to clients is linked to the process through which clients participate in the JOBS program: orientation, individual planning, and progress through a range of training activities into employment. To understand this process from the perspectives of the clients, the authors asked respondents at the local level to describe the JOBS orientation process step by step, focusing on the points in the process when child care is discussed. Although there were subtle variations across states and within states in the ways clients learned about child care, the study revealed many similarities.

Orientation

Generally, once an AFDC recipient becomes a JOBS program participant, whether his or her participation* has been solicited or she volunteers, she attends a group orientation session about the JOBS program. Infrequently, a JOBS program caseworker

** Both males and females are JOBS participants and counselors. However, since the majority of both are female, for simplicity the feminine pronoun is used in this report.*

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might offer a one-to-one orientation in the office. "Orientation is only done individually when there are extenuating circumstances," one worker said. "When [clients] need it," said another. "If they are LEP [limited English proficiency] or under 24 years of age," others reported.

During the more typical group orientation sessions, the speaker introduces the JOBS program to the clients and explains what the program will involve, often using videotape presentations to convey some of the information. In these sessions, child care is named only as one of a variety of support services to which JOBS clients are entitled. Clients are told that they can get child care if they need it, and that it will be paid for. Interviewed caseworkers said they discuss child care in more detail with clients who ask for more information, but they do not routinely provide specifics or consumer education about child care to all JOBS clients.

Child care and the employability plan

After the basic orientation, the JOBS participant meets individually with a caseworker. Once the caseworker assesses the participant's skills, the client and caseworker work together to devise an employability plan listing various activities the client will move through sequentially, such as preparation for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED), a class in English as a Second Language (ESL), vocational training, career planning, or a job search. The fact that the client needs to arrange child care is noted during this interview and during the ensuing activities. One New York City caseworker said, "We discuss child care with all of the clients before we refer them to an activity. If they need child care, we discuss it in more detail." "Discuss" in this context means that the caseworker asks the client whether she already has child care. If so, she is given the necessary forms to arrange for payment; or, in Texas, she is told where to call to arrange for payment.

If the client has not already found child care, the caseworker's response can vary. She generally gives the client a brochure about child care options. In some states, the caseworker is the only person available to review child care options with the client; in others, the caseworker will refer the client to a group session on child care that may meet once a week or every other week. These sessions often include videotape presentations on child care; this is the case in Georgia, New York, and Illinois. A third alternative is for the caseworker to refer the client to an R&R agency that has a contract with the JOBS office to counsel JOBS participants. This approach is used in Massachusetts, some parts of Illinois and California, and in one county in Maryland.

When JOBS programs contract formally with R&Rs for child care assistance, the R&R counselors generally discuss child care with those JOBS participants who have been unable to arrange child care on their own, or with those who say they want to use regulated care. Rarely are the R&R services made available to all participants. One

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R&R director in Maryland said, "Our phone number is given to those parents interested in regulated child care, not to those who already have child care or those who want informal care. The client has to express a need for regulated care before she receives our phone number." Both the R&R and the JOBS caseworker provide detailed child care information only when clients actively request it.

When child care breaks down

The other common point at which child care discussions occur is when a client engaged in a JOBS activity reports that her child care arrangement has broken down. The caseworker will then work to solve the problem or will refer the client to a group child care information session or to an R&R for assistance.

Limitations of these approaches to consumer education

In the nine states studied, the client is left virtually alone to assess her own need for child care information and to determine what is best for her and her family—whether or not she is knowledgeable about child care. A more serious discovery is that the client must often make certain decisions on her first day in the JOBS program, when all she has been told is that child care will be paid for. As one caseworker from the Michigan Opportunity & Skills Training (MOST) program said, "We don't educate parents about child care, we talk about payment."

If child care information is limited to discussing payment mechanisms, then the opportunity to educate all JOBS clients about child care is lost. Only those clients who assertively ask for more information, who are unable to arrange care on their own, or whose child care breaks down have access to detailed information about child care options.

This approach to child care consumer education can be detrimental to the self-sufficiency the JOBS program is designed to promote. Many JOBS clients have never had to look for or to use child care before, because many have never been employed. They may have negative images about child care, based on what they have heard from friends and through the media, and they may be fearful. Those who have a relative or a friend looking after their child may not realize they are entitled to use another type of care, let alone to ask for information about alternative options. Becoming self-sufficient is a gradual process for anyone, and it is one that the JOBS program could foster by giving clients counseling, information, and practice using new skills. Helping them mount a careful, informed search for child care could be a good place to start.

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The Content of JOBS Consumer Education

While the process of consumer education follows a similar pattern in the states investigated, and the information presented in the initial orientation is fairly standard, the content of subsequent consumer education steps varies a great deal. The simple message presented during the main orientation to the JOBS program is: "If you need child care, the choice is yours and the government will pay for it." At that time, there is no discussion about different forms of child care, ways to search for and select care, and different payment mechanisms and subsidy programs. The small percentage of participants who receive the second level of child care information—because they raise the issue with the caseworker, attend a special session on child care, or are referred to an R&R agency—usually learn considerably more.

Types of child care

The second-level sessions on child care typically include descriptions of different forms of child care and how to choose among them. The emphasis is on parental choice and the fact that the JOBS program will pay for the care. However, child care options are nearly always described from the state's perspective as regulator rather than from the consumer's perspective. In other words, clients learn that centers and family day care homes are the licensed (or registered) types of child care, and that in-home sitters, relatives, neighbors, and friends are not monitored by the state and must be judged by the consumer alone. It is extremely unusual for caseworkers to mention part-day programs such as Head Start or state prekindergarten programs even though these programs serve children from low-income families.

A caseworker who specializes in child care generally conducts these second-level child care sessions. She uses the opportunity to urge the participants to visit child care providers and ask questions before they decide. Often she distributes a checklist for assessing child care providers, and in Illinois and New York, video presentations note that R&R agencies can help the client find child care. In some of the videotapes (and in a face-to-face session observed in New York City), the discussion also addresses feelings parents may have about child care, such as fear or sadness at the separation, and it takes up typical problems with child care, such as lack of reliability or high cost.

When a well-prepared child care specialist in the local JOBS office, or an R&R agency under a JOBS program contract, provides this second level of child care information, the session may cover an even wider variety of topics. For example, in the Employment and Training Office of Napa County in California, JOBS participants attend a half-day session on support services of which "child care is the most important," where they hear about regulated and unregulated care as well as Head Start and the state's

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preschool program. There the participants learn about three perspectives on child care: that of the child, that of the parent, and that of the provider. Each Napa County JOBS client can then arrange an individual session to discuss her particular needs and preferences. This was the only instance in the interview process when Head Start or state-funded prekindergarten programs were mentioned spontaneously. Most local caseworkers believed either that parents already knew about those programs, or that they would not be good child care arrangements because they were part-day. Head Start and other preschool programs that offer comprehensive, high quality services are known to be especially beneficial to low-income children. For this reason, including them in the set of child care options suggested to JOBS parents is particularly important. Part-day programs can be combined with relative care or family day care to provide a full day of child care.

Informing and guiding parental choices

R&R counselors generally approach the communication of child care information as a two-way process: the parent offers information about her child, her desires and values, her work and transportation needs, and her questions about child care; and the counselor offers information about types of care, what to look for and ask about when visiting a provider, and the location of providers that fit the parent's requirements. In Baltimore, the R&R counselors also contact providers to find ones with vacancies, and they continue to follow up with parents until they have found satisfactory child care.

When a JOBS caseworker provides child care information to a client individually, the content varies widely, depending on that caseworker's experience, perspective, and training, as well as her understanding of the spirit and letter of the Family Support Act. Some caseworkers offer virtually no information—in a sincere effort to promote self-sufficiency and avoid influencing the parent's choice. Other caseworkers, who know they are to neither prohibit the use of relatives nor emphasize centers, will quickly suggest relative care, rationalizing that relative care is likely to be the client's first choice anyway. (One caseworker also noted that relative care is usually cheaper than other forms of child care.) Another caseworker, who tries to think ahead on behalf of the client, said, "I always recommend formal care in centers because after TCC [the Transitional Child Care subsidy program] funds have been completed, the client can move the child to Title XX [another subsidy program] funds. They can't do this with informal care." The caseworker revealed her values when she added, "Also, it is better for a child to be in a center."

Although nearly all R&R counselors interviewed reported that they had been trained in techniques for counseling parents about child care, few JOBS caseworkers receive training in child care counseling. They must rely on their own resources. The training they receive usually covers eligibility determination, allowable child care, and proper procedures for completing paperwork and for informing clients of their rights and

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responsibilities. A caseworker said, "We have training on what the state requires, what will be reimbursed. Besides that, since we are all mothers ourselves, we offer our own experience as mothers." Caseworkers in the other study states echoed this comment repeatedly, showing both how eager they are to help their clients with this difficult decision and how unprepared they are to be child care consumer educators.

Managing child care transitions

Stable child care arrangements are beneficial to children's development and support the productivity of parents,[2] but achieving stability is especially problematic for JOBS participants. As a parent who needs child care moves through the JOBS program, she becomes eligible for different child care subsidy programs—first JOBS-related child care, then Transitional Child Care benefits, then child care subsidies designed for low-income working families. When the eligibility criteria, fee scales, and forms of allowable care are different among these programs, the parent may have to leave one child care provider for another, just to keep the subsidy. In addition, as the parent moves from part-time training or school into a full-time job, her child care needs will change in ways that may also disrupt child care arrangements.

State agency and local JOBS caseworkers described how they were helping parents manage these potentially complicated child care transitions. Their explanations fell into two main categories: "The local caseworker is supposed to help with that," or "Eligibility reviews are done regularly; we make sure the client knows when a change is coming up; and we inform the caseworker of the next [child care subsidy] program." While it is important for clients to know of their eligibility for other child care subsidies, these responses may not help the parents avoid child care discontinuities. Some caseworkers do recognize the problem, but the only solution open to them is to steer the client toward a form of child care allowable under all payment systems (in most cases, centers); however, this may conflict with the mandate to support parent choice.

These problems are troubling, but they are not surprising. The child care subsidy system is complex in virtually all the states. Serious promotion of parent choice and child care stability would require policy changes that are beyond the authority of any state's JOBS agency; it would involve other state departments, such as education and social services. A truly seamless subsidy system—seamless from the parent's point of view—would require a centralized program eligibility tracking system; assurance that all forms of child care would be allowed in all subsidy programs; reimbursement rates in each program that cover the actual costs of care; and a similar sliding fee scale for all options. Texas, with its Child Care Management Services, may come the closest to having a seamless funding system, although problems remain to be worked out. In the absence of such structured and user-friendly subsidy systems, consumer education programs

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should advise parents from the outset that child care subsidies entail different regulations, reimbursement rates, and co-payments, and that the subsidy programs will change as the parents move through JOBS and into employment. Clients may welcome help choosing child care arrangements that can survive those changes.

Variability in JOBS consumer education

As the examples above show, the content and process of consumer education depend on the agency or person providing the child care information and on the preparation that agency or person has received concerning child care issues. When an R&R has been contracted by the state or locality to work with JOBS clients, the nature of the information given to the client will differ from the guidance that a welfare caseworker can offer. The interaction may differ as well. However, when budget constraints mean that only a few minutes can be spent with each client, neither counselors nor caseworkers are able to give the individual attention many parents need.

Financial constraints also can sharply affect consumer education. For example, in one state, the state-level JOBS child care program manager said that, because the state could no longer afford to fully fund the voucher program, clients who began the program after a certain date were permitted to use only family day care or informal "baby-sitters," since those types of care cost the state less than center-based care. Clients who entered the JOBS program after that date received information only about those two child care options, not about any others.

Finally, consumer education differences reflect the availability of child care in the area where the client lives or is seeking child care. One caseworker indicated that she does not talk about a type of child care arrangement if it is not a viable option for the client—because it does not exist in the client's neighborhood, because she lacks transportation to get to it, or because there are no openings. The rationale for limiting the information offered seems to be: Why tell clients about something they cannot have? Yet this occasion may be the only opportunity the parent will have to reflect on the strengths and limitations of different types of child care arrangements.

Strategies and Media

The most common media used to convey child care information, both generally and in the JOBS program, are print and videotapes. The printed materials provided by the JOBS program staff ranged from mimeographed checklists or definitions of legal child care to glossy brochures with clear and visually attractive messages about where to go for help finding child care. Most are available in Spanish as well as

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English. For example, in Atlanta, the Child Care Support Center has developed simple brochures about searching for and arranging suitable care during weekend and evening hours, and a cartoon-like pamphlet on choosing family day care and centers in English, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Russian. The Maryland Committee for Children, through its R&R called LOCATE, has developed a brochure written at a fourth-grade reading level; it explains to JOBS clients how to use the comprehensive R&R services provided especially for them.

Several states have made child care videotapes either especially for the JOBS program, as in Illinois, or suitable for both JOBS and non-AFDC populations, as in Georgia and New York. Each of the videos is specific to the state that produced it, so none can be adopted directly. Nevertheless, synopses of these state videotapes give a sense of the approach these three states have taken to child care consumer education:

- The imaginative videotape produced in Illinois follows a soap opera format. It opens with a camera shot of a book labeled "All My Child Care" (or "Todos de mi Cuidado de Niños" in the Spanish version of the same tape). The stories of two women unfold, each capturing some of the typical problems of child care. One woman rushes her son to an emergency room after a fall at the neighbor's apartment where he stays while she works. The other story opens with a mother of two who is in school being told by her mother, who cares for the children, that she can no longer help with the children because her mother (the children's great-grandmother) has fallen and broken her hip. Each woman receives advice about her child care problem from various sources—the landlady, the hospital receptionist, a caseworker. An R&R agency helps one find family day care and centers, and visits to good examples of both types of care are depicted. The videotape even includes a lively song-and-dance number in which a caseworker urges the viewer to call for help with child care.

  Accurate information in everyday language is woven throughout the videotape to explain what is available through the Illinois Department of Public Aid—such as help finding child care, money to pay for it, and even help after the client stops receiving public aid checks. Although this overt message is clear and accurate, the videotape also conveys an underlying message that formal (regulated) child care is best, and it implies that relatives and friends offer child care that could be unsafe or unreliable. Neither Head Start nor the widespread Illinois prekindergarten programs are mentioned, although some of those programs probably offer extended hours or could be combined with care by relatives or friends. This informative videotape would have been even better had it offered advice about improving informal care situations and had it suggested combining forms of care to take advantage of part-day preschool programs.

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- New York's videotape presents visually the same information often presented in pamphlets—kinds of child care, where to look, what to look for, and the importance of visiting several providers before making a choice. It includes vignettes of "real" people making child care selections for children of different ages and abilities. The videotape suggests a wide range of places to call in search of child care: R&Rs, religious organizations, girls' and boys' clubs, Y's, and the United Way. Oddly, public schools (where state-funded prekindergarten programs and school-age child care programs are housed) and Head Start agencies are not mentioned. The list of what parents should look for includes evidence of the provider's permit or license, as well as such features as a caring person and a safe, clean place with plenty of toys. A bureaucratic, regulatory perspective influences the description of two types of child care: those the state regulates and those that parents must judge for themselves. They are described in official terms, not everyday language. No information on the cost of child care or assistance with payment is included, beyond a suggestion that the viewer check with a local social services office. The information in this videotape is solid and accurate, however didactic.

- "Child Care Choices," Georgia's videotape, is intended for parents of all income levels who are facing child care problems. It tells stories of three families: a teenage mother living with her parents must find care for her three-year-old in order to attend school; a widowed father needs child care for his two children, ages two and nine, while he works a 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. shift; and a married couple want child care for their four-year-old, six-year-old, and baby on the way, as they are both employed full-time.

  In each scenario, the parents seek out child care information from others. The teenage mother is steered into using center care when a caseworker at the Department of Children and Family Services tells her that "a good choice for Crissy might be a day care center" and does not tell her about any other types of child care. The caseworker suggests that she visit a center, preferably in the morning, and tells her what to look for; the caseworker suggests that the mother get her questions answered before she leaves. The widowed father, while conversing with a male co-worker about day care centers' inconvenient hours, learns about a family child care provider whom he subsequently visits and decides to use. The married couple, having already decided that in-home care would be best for them, call a state office to get information and referrals.

  The message implied by these three Georgia videotape stories is that there is a correct type of child care for a certain type of family. Rather than showing each choice and selection as a unique decision that results from the careful weighing of the pros and cons of available options, the videotape prescribes a single arrangement for each situation. In closing, the video reviews the three elements of good child care: warm, loving care, and guidance; a safe, secure, clean, and healthy setting; and activities that help children. It

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emphasizes that the selection of child care is an important decision that requires thought and planning, and that child care is an investment in a child's future.

In most cases, JOBS participants view these videotapes during a group child care session where brochures, checklists, booklets, and information sheets are also distributed. These sessions can provide a setting where all of the information is brought to life through discussion among the participants. Often, discussion is encouraged: one local JOBS program invites former AFDC recipients to come in to speak to the group about their experiences with child care. The level of child care information that participants derive from these group meetings can be much richer, more detailed, and probably more helpful than what they gain from more passive forms of consumer education.

JOBS Child Care Scenarios: Hypothetical, but Drawn from Reality

Arranging child care is a complex and individual process that may be best described in stories. The same is true of the often haphazard process by which JOBS clients learn about child care and make their child care decisions. To illustrate how the lack of a good child care consumer education process can look and feel *from the JOBS clients' perspectives*, the authors prepared two fictitious "worst-case scenarios" of JOBS clients' experiences with the JOBS program and its child care consumer education processes. A description of the problems encountered by the client follows each scenario, as well as suggestions that could improve the process.

Brenda and Vivian

In early spring, Brenda and Vivian, two single mothers receiving AFDC, each received a JOBS notification letter from the department of social services. The letter said that they must participate in the JOBS program, unless they qualify for an exemption, or their AFDC benefits will end. The first activity the women were required to attend was a JOBS orientation session being given in three weeks at the local department of social services office.

Brenda

Brenda, a nineteen-year-old mother of a 16-month-old daughter, Samantha, was a single parent supported primarily by the check she received from the AFDC program. She had mixed feelings about the JOBS notification letter. While she was excited about the prospect of obtaining a GED, equivalent to a high school degree, she was concerned about leaving Samantha. She read in the letter that the state would help pay for child care, but she had never left Samantha with anyone else before, except Samantha's great-grandmother on rare occasions.

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During the hour-long JOBS orientation session, Brenda sat quietly. She was one of 20 or so young women participating. They watched a video, which described all of the possible activities JOBS program participants could take part in, and which listed the support services they would be entitled to receive. The part that scared Brenda the most was the part about child care. Participants were told that if they didn't have child care, such as a relative or a friend to care for their children, they would need to find it.

Brenda's grandmother lived five blocks away, but she had never taken care of Samantha for more than a few hours. She was elderly, and her eyesight had recently begun to worsen; it was even difficult for her to lift up Samantha. Brenda was pleased that she could leave Samantha with someone she knew and trusted, but she worried about leaving the toddler with her grandmother on a full-time basis. From what she had heard, however, she did not think she had another option.

After the initial orientation session, Brenda met with a caseworker to discuss her Individual Employability Plan. They decided that she would attend the GED program. The caseworker then took out a form and asked, "Do you have child care for your daughter?"

"Well, my grandmother is taking care of my daughter today, and she takes care of her once in a while when I need her. She lives five blocks from me," Brenda replied.

"All right," the caseworker said. "Here is the form you and your grandmother need to complete. You should bring it back to me, filled out, at your next appointment. It is very important that we do the necessary paperwork so that you can begin participating in the JOBS program. Do you have any questions?"

"When will I start my GED class?" Brenda asked.

"Since your grandmother will be taking care of your daughter," the caseworker replied, "you can begin your GED class next Monday. In two weeks, you will need to come back into this office to drop off the form I gave you, and we will discuss how the class is going." The caseworker then provided Brenda with the necessary information about where her GED class would meet.

The caseworker did not hear from Brenda again until two weeks later, when she arrived for her follow-up appointment, accompanied by her daughter.

"Hello, Brenda. How is your GED class going?" the caseworker asked.

"Well, my grandmother took care of Samantha for a week and then decided she couldn't do it. Samantha was just too much for her to handle. Then I couldn't go to my class because I didn't have anyone to take care of Samantha," said Brenda.

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"You will have to find another arrangement," replied the caseworker. "You can attend a child care orientation session here this Friday afternoon. The staff will tell you about child care centers, show you a video, and give you a list of places to choose from. You can go out and visit some of them and choose the one you think will be best for you and Samantha. The state will pay for Samantha's child care during the hours you are in your GED class. The choice is yours."

Brenda attended the child care orientation, where she heard about how to choose a center, what to look for on a visit to the site, and what questions to ask. There was a time at the orientation for participants to share ideas and ask questions. That session made Brenda feel more confident about finding a child care arrangement that would work out. Indeed, Brenda was able to find a center with space for Samantha, but the search took nearly two weeks, and by then, Brenda had missed too many of her GED classes to continue. She had to start over at a later date.

Analysis of the scenario:

- **Initially, Brenda received incomplete information about her child care options. The orientation session did not help her consider alternatives, or point out that help was available to make a good, stable child care arrangement.**
- **The caseworker did not give Brenda enough time to make an informed choice about child care. Informal child care arrangements that are not carefully set up, like this one, often break down quickly, and when they do break down they may affect a mother's ability to successfully participate in the JOBS program.**
- **The participants in this child care orientation learned only about child care centers, not about registered or licensed family day care homes or about other forms of child care possibly exempt from licensure. That meant that Brenda still had not heard about all of her child care options.**
- **Brenda did not receive correct information about child care at the right time, and she suffered the consequences. She had to discontinue her GED class and begin all over again; and Samantha experienced several disruptive changes in her daily routines.**

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Vivian

Vivian, a 20-year-old mother of two, had become pregnant with her first child, James, during her last year of high school. Vivian was determined to graduate, however, and she was able to do so. One year later, she became pregnant with her second child, Rosa.

Vivian had worked part-time as an assistant cook in a local restaurant for a short period of time after James was born. She would bring James to work with her, and somehow she managed to get by on the money she earned. But when Rosa was born, this work/child care combination was no longer feasible. Vivian was barely able to feed her family on the meager wages she was earning, and she could not afford to pay for child care for her two children. She then quit her job to take care of the children, and she applied for AFDC and was accepted.

When Vivian received a letter from the department of social services about the JOBS program, she became very excited. She saw that the program was an opportunity for her to get back on her feet and be the kind of person and role model she had always wanted to be for her children.

Vivian attended the JOBS program group orientation session and then proceeded into an office to meet with a caseworker. Vivian expressed an interest in obtaining computer training, and she and her caseworker began discussing how this could be arranged.

"I need child care for my two children," Vivian said. "The lady in the orientation told me that this would be covered."

"Yes, that's right," the caseworker replied. "We will pay for your child care, as long as it is licensed or license-exempt." The caseworker pulled out two pieces of paper. "I think a center would be good for your children. It is the best learning environment for children from a disadvantaged background. A center will provide enrichment and learning experiences for them. Here is a list of day care centers in your area. The decision is up to you. It would be a good idea for you to go and visit a few before you select one. It is your choice. You know your needs better than anyone. You need to choose the one that you feel is right for you and your children," explained the caseworker.

Then she added, pointing to the other piece of paper, "When you make your final decision, this is the form you and the center need to fill out. After you have done so, you need to bring it back to me for processing. You have three days to select a child care arrangement, so you had better get started when you get home today, right?"

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"Okay," Vivian replied, although she felt somewhat confused. She had never looked for child care before. She thought, "What do I say when I call? What do I look for when I visit? How do I choose?"

Vivian picked a name on the list that appealed to her, and called up and arranged for a visit. After a brief conversation with the director of the center and a quick look around, Vivian made a decision. The center had room for both of her children, and it looked fine as far as she could tell. Besides, her three days were almost up, and she needed to make a decision.

Vivian used this center for the duration of her computer training. Her children, although resistant to going to the center at first, became comfortable with the arrangement over time.

Vivian was very excited when she finally finished her training and was ready to find a job. She searched and searched for an entry-level position, but after two weeks, she still could not find a suitable job. Then, to her surprise, her caseworker informed her that the state would pay for child care for only two weeks after her training ended. Her children would have to leave the day care center until she found a job and her transitional child care payments went into effect.

Vivian could not understand why her caseworker had not told her about this earlier. She had to take her children out of the center until she found a job, because she could not afford to pay for the center on her own. After two more weeks of searching, she was able to find a job, but by the time she went back to the center, all of the places had been filled. She would have to find another child care arrangement by Monday, when her new job was to begin, and her children would have to adjust to a new child care environment all over again.

Analysis of the scenario:

- **Vivian was told by the caseworker what kind of child care she should use. The caseworker indicated that a center would be the best environment for Vivian's children, but she did not review any alternatives, such as good family day care, or a program like Head Start for the older child. While the caseworker was correct in saying that low-income children benefit from quality child care, it was inappropriate for her to suggest that only one form of care offers a good learning environment for children.**
- **What parent choice meant, in Vivian's case, was that she was told to go out and choose from a list of child care centers, even though she had received no information**

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on how to be a good consumer of child care—what to look for and what questions to ask. The caseworker's statement that the child care selection should be the parent's choice was correct, but she undermined that statement by directing Vivian toward centers only, and then by leaving her without sufficient information about how to choose a quality situation.

- **Even if Vivian had had more guidance on how to choose child care, she was given only three days to search for and decide on an arrangement. This was the actual practice in one of the NCCP study states. Three days is not enough time for any parent to conduct a thorough search for child care, especially a parent who has never before used out-of-home care.**
- **If Vivian had known that her child care subsidy would continue only for two weeks after her JOBS training activity (if she did not immediately find a job), she might have started looking for work before her training program ended; or she might have set up alternate child care arrangements in case she could not find a job that quickly. This poorly managed transition meant that she lost her children's spaces in the center, and once again she had just a few days to find another place for them.**

Why do things go wrong?

There are a number of apparently reasonable explanations for why JOBS program caseworkers do not conduct child care consumer education as well as it could be done. Some workers are trying to save money for the state. They reason, "If we talk about child care to clients who don't say they need it, they may try to get more costly child care just because they think they're entitled to it." Another argument is that if the supply of formal child care is scarce, or if state payments are so low that few providers accept subsidized children, then there is no need to inform clients about alternatives because they could not purchase them anyway. Some caseworkers give clients no information at all, believing that to offer any information might influence the parent and so undermine the concept of parental choice.

Finally, caseworkers have been trained to manage the paperwork of child care subsidies, but they have not been trained in child care counseling. Like Vivian's caseworker, they may allow their personal biases to color the information they give clients. Or they may feel unprepared to address child care with their clients because they do not know enough about the effects of child care on children, the ways parents think about child care, and the important role child care plays in supporting the self-sufficiency of families. In the JOBS program, child care is called a support service, like transportation, and children can be viewed as merely a barrier to adult employment rather than as individuals who deserve the support offered by the FSA.

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A Proposal for Consumer Education in the JOBS Program

Providing child care consumer education that is sensitive, objective, timely, relevant, and genuinely helpful to parents who are trying to become economically self-sufficient is no easy matter. Yet, steps can be taken to change both the content and the timing of consumer education, and the knowledge and attitudes of the people who provide it. What follows is a proposal for key modifications that could significantly increase the helpfulness of the JOBS program child care guarantee.

The findings of this special study indicate that, ideally, JOBS staff members should tell all clients who have children under 12 the following basic information when they enroll in the program:

- The child care you will need to participate in the JOBS program will be paid for while you are in a JOBS activity and for up to one year after you leave AFDC.
- You can choose the kind of child care that suits you and your child or children: a relative, a trusted friend, a family day care home, a child care center, Head Start, another preschool program, or a combination of these.
- A person well trained in child care on our staff (or at a child care resource and referral agency) will help you get more information, will discuss alternatives and choices with you, and will make sure you are able to find the care you need.
- Our staff will follow up with you periodically to make sure that your care arrangement continues to meet your needs.

This initial information can be provided in the basic JOBS orientation, or when a caseworker first talks with the client. A group session on child care should follow the JOBS orientation immediately and also be available at least twice a week at convenient times for those parents who do not choose to attend it immediately. All clients with children 12 years old or under should be strongly encouraged to attend. Even those who have child care should be urged to come to be sure they have selected the best option and be better prepared in case their arrangement later breaks down. Not knowing the alternatives, and having to get into a child care session later, could mean missing time from a JOBS activity or from work.

In this model, the group session offers a chance to discuss child care in more depth, and the leader encourages everyone to join in. Issues such as parents' feelings about their children, their past experience with child care, and questions and fears about child care may come up. The leader explains that choosing child care is an important decision-making process that begins with the parents answering two questions: What does my child need in terms of love, education, safety, and security? And what do I need in terms of hours, location, flexibility, and price?

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When the leader presents child care options, she can adopt the perspective of the parent and begin with the family, leading out to friends, and then to more formal options. The message to be stressed is that quality matters, and that quality must be defined from both child and family perspectives. A well-trained leader is well informed generally about how parents search for and select child care, what leads to satisfaction, and the dual role that child care plays in families; the leader also knows specifics about the local child care market, as well as administrative aspects of JOBS child care and other subsidy programs. Group discussions can include topics like how to make stable child care arrangements, what to consider in selecting an arrangement, and the differences among child care subsidy programs.

The best type of videotape for this type of group session would depict believable low-income parents engaged in the process of decision-making, talking to family members and close friends for advice, and exploring their options. The parents might be shown talking to a grandmother about providing child care, visiting several centers and a Head Start program in a low-income neighborhood, or interviewing family child care providers, and then reflecting on the possibilities that each alternative offers for themselves and their children. If an R&R agency is readily available in the community, the role it can play should be shown and briefly explained. Some of the parents can be pictured deciding on a certain child care setting, while others may consider options but leave their choice open. The story might end with one parent saying she feels pleased with her decision, while another says she is thinking about what she has learned and feels good knowing she has options and the right to choose. The aim of the videotape would be to give parents the message that child care is important and that they have the right to make an informed and careful choice. The group leader could encourage parents to talk together after the videotape has ended, and perhaps get together to help one another search for and arrange child care.

In this "ideal" JOBS program model, when the client meets with the caseworker to discuss the employability plan, the caseworker talks with the client in detail about her child care arrangements—after the client's interests and other needs have been reviewed. Child care cannot be arranged without a caseworker first knowing what activity the client will participate in, for how many hours at what time of day, and where that activity is located. To help the client plan for stability, some information about the logistics of subsequent activities should also be included. This conversation would take place with all clients, reinforcing the messages conveyed in the group session, and allowing time for the client to raise any questions or concerns she may have about her children and about child care.

Child care can be the subject of discussion at many points throughout the JOBS program—for example, during "Career Preparation" or "Introduction to the World of Work" seminars. Because most families must arrange child care more than once, choosing care is a necessary job-related skill that will come into play many times during a

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working parent's career. The need for child care changes over time, as parents change jobs or work hours, as new children are born and others grow older. Moreover, the information and strategies that enable parents *to find* a satisfactory child care arrangement differ form those that are needed *to maintain* a good one over time. Knowing when and how to make changes in an unsatisfactory arrangement is important information and a valuable skill.

The staff of this model JOBS program, who take child care seriously as a crucial support for the parent and a potentially beneficial experience for the child, have to learn as much about the local child care system as they know about the community's employment training options. Some JOBS offices designate one caseworker to act as the training liaison—visiting local training programs to which JOBS participants might be referred and reporting to fellow caseworkers. Likewise, one or more caseworkers can be assigned to focus on the community's child care system, either in partnership with an R&R agency or by forming a committee of local experts representing the diversity of the child care system. Such a committee might include directors of child care centers and Head Start programs, representatives of family day care provider networks or associations, public school personnel, recreation programs and other youth-serving agencies, and child care regulatory staff. As child care specialists emerge among the caseworkers, they may take on the leadership of regular child care seminars. In the meantime, specialists can be hired (perhaps from the local R&R) to conduct the group child care sessions or to train caseworkers to do them. If an R&R exists in the community, the JOBS program can invest in its expertise to help design and carry out child care consumer education for JOBS participants.

These changes in the delivery of child care consumer education cannot occur without more training for caseworkers concerning child care issues. Those who are responsive to their clients as parents will not find it difficult to take on the greater role as child care counselor, as long as they have training and support from supervisors for this role. Some already believe that this is part of their job. One caseworker, an exception, said, "We discuss [child care] with all parents who have children under 12 years old. It is required that we address it and any problems; even if the client already has child care, we still discuss it."

Effective child care training for caseworkers must extend considerably beyond its typical focus on bureaucratic priorities, like the proper completion of paperwork and means of monitoring client compliance. Many state networks of R&R agencies already offer regular training sessions for their parent counselors, and these might serve as a source for JOBS caseworker training, either under a separate contract or by holding a joint training session. For example, the New York State Child Care Coordinating Council adopted a collaborative approach to bring together county departments of social services caseworkers and local R&R phone counselors for training sessions where they focus on understanding and meeting the child care needs of low-income parents. In such joint efforts,

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each group of trainees, the caseworkers and the phone counselors, has something to learn and something to share, with the result that the community's low-income families will be better understood and better served.

Some of these modifications in the management of the JOBS program's child care guarantee are sizable (involving staff time and the costs of specialized training), but others are quite modest and demand a shift in philosophy more than anything else. The process and timing of child care consumer education are factors that are as critical to effectiveness as the specific information that is conveyed. The attitudes and knowledge of the staff who talk with parents about their child care concerns can make the difference between a JOBS child care program that supports parents and one that undermines their efforts to make this critical decision well.

Conclusion

If all JOBS participants could attend a good, balanced, detailed child care orientation when they first enter the program, and could have the support of individual conversations to work through their particular problems, they would make more stable, successful child care arrangements. Many forms of care can work well for families—center care, family day care, and care by friends or relatives—but they take time and forethought to arrange. The support of families as they attempt to move from welfare to self-sufficiency is important, and serious attention must be paid to ensuring that those parents have every opportunity to make the best possible child care arrangement for their family.

Child care not only will affect the family in its efforts to leave welfare, but will play a major role in shaping the life course of the next generation—the children of AFDC mothers. And while consumer education is a crucial element in any strategy to promote self-sufficiency and informed choice, it cannot stand alone. Choice is an act of selection by a well-educated consumer who has purchasing power (whether it comes from income or from subsidies) and real options.

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